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U. S. Department of Agriculture

# CACTI AND SUCCULENTS

What They Are—Where They Are From

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## WHAT IS CACTUS?

THE thousands of plants known as Succulents include those strangely unique forms which, through evolution, have adapted themselves to resist or survive long periods of drought. These plants, in the distant past, had leaves and flourished as do other plants living under conditions where the extremes of dryness are not as pronounced. As certain areas became hotter and dryer these plants changed their forms and the leaves were modified into thickened bodies hardly recognizable as leaves. Many plants gave up their leaves altogether and the leaf functions were transferred to swollen stems and were replaced by defensive spines. By reducing the leaf surface, the moisture usually given off was reduced to a minimum. The plant bodies became covered with a waxy coating, hairs, and other specialized evaporation resisting coverings for the protection of these succulents until the next rains, which were readily absorbed and retained through the dry seasons.

Succulents are found in many plant families growing in all parts of the world, from high barren mountain slopes to arid wastes. Among the succulents is a group of plants called Cactus (cacti, meaning several and pronounced kak-tie). The Cactus family is the only group all of which are succulents. Whereas the other succulents are found in Africa and many other countries, cacti are all native to the Americas, where they have attained a most unusual variety of forms and defensive armour, yet produce flowers which rival the orchids.

Other plants have spines or thorns but a characteristic of the cactus is its spine-cushion bearing spines or bristly hairs. Cacti range in size from the Giants of Arizona weighing tons to the Button Cactus the size of a penny. The diversified forms are interesting for themselves but the beautiful flowers are beyond description. Anyone is challenged to obtain a few plants and to enjoy the thrill of seeing beauty which can be found in no other forms of plant life.

The growing of cacti and the other succulents has long passed the stage of a fad. They have become well-known throughout the world where they thrive and respond to careful treatment, thus proving that cacti are not living in arid deserts because they want to, but from necessity.

## HOW TO GROW CACTI

Cacti cannot be grown in pure sand as is generally believed. Even our deserts are rich in leafmold and only require rain to bring forth vegetation. Feed your cacti or they will starve.

A good soil mixture is: one-third garden loam, one-third

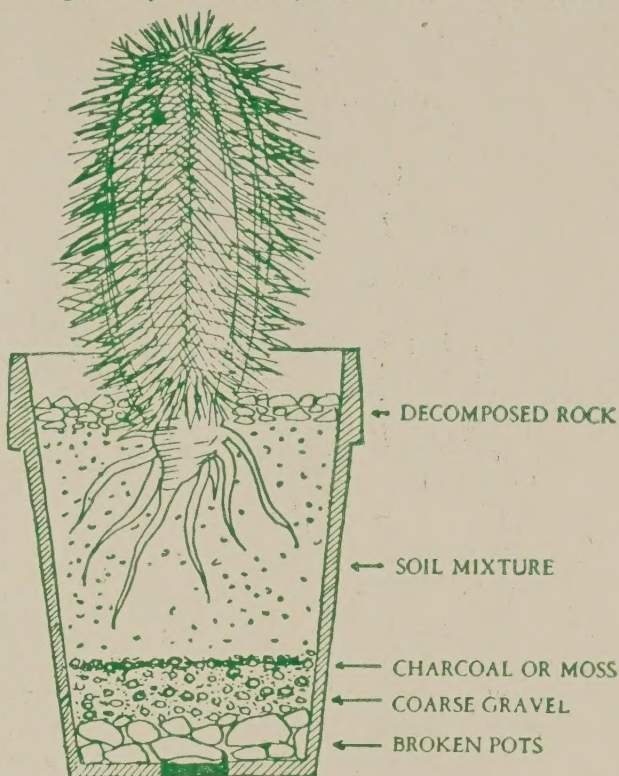
leafmold, and one-third coarse sand (not beach sand). To this may be added poultry charcoal, old mortar (crushed), and well decomposed manure (for seedlings and for such types as Epiphyllums, use more fertilizer and a richer mixture). Water freely during the growing season, which can be observed by new spines, new wool, or a change in the shade of green.

The soil must never remain soggy. Water thoroughly and then allow the plant to become almost dry. The soil should be so porous that the water will drain through the soil within a minute. If the water remains on top of the soil, then there is not enough sand and leafmold and the mixture is said to be too heavy. Pots should have drainage in the bottom or side. Be sure pots are not too large or the soil may retain too much moisture. Repot every other year to avoid root mealy bugs. Keep ants and sow bugs from entering through the hole in the bottom of the pot.

Give the plants as much light as possible without being in full summer sun. Lath placed two inches apart will prevent sunburn. A north window is not suitable.

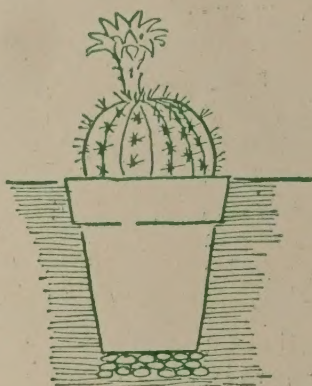
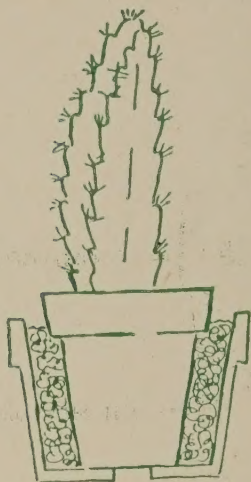
Plants may be rooted in damp sand during warm weather. In setting plants out of doors be sure to protect them from direct sun until they become accustomed to the change. Too much sun will turn some species yellow. After the growing season, cacti, like most plants, need a rest period when they may be kept in an airy, cool cellar or in the attic where the temperature does not go below 40 degrees F.

Caution: Be sure that new plants have clean roots without any round globules on them. Remove any infected roots or





fine roots which will decay and cause trouble. Old plants make healthier growth by re-rooting entirely or only saving the unbroken roots that are not dried out; allow any new cuts to callous over before applying moisture. Seedlings may be re-established without removing roots. Use an oil spray monthly.



Drying out of clay pots may be prevented by  
(1) Placing one pot within another (2)  
Plunging the pot in soil or a box of sand.

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